

Expeditionary Warfare and the MPF

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the Maritime Prepositioning Force
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Introduction

Expeditionary Maneuver Warfare (EMW) is the operational future of the Marine Corps. It is a culminating idea built on the Marine Corps' current core competencies, integrating concepts, operational concepts, and functional concepts (Expeditionary Warfare A-3). The ability of the Marine Corps to be the nations premier force in readiness depends on EMW transitioning from a concept to a reality. The ability of the Marine Corps to move substantial combat power into theater and sustain that combat power is dependent on the Maritime Prepositioning Force (MPF); however, the current MPF squadrons cannot fulfill the EMW vision. EMW as a capstone concept cannot be fully realized without a considerable enhancement of the Maritime Prepositioning Force.

History of the MPF

The history of the MPF program dates back to 1979 when the Secretary of Defense authorized its development as part of an initiative to improve response time for contingencies in Southwest Asia (N75 Office of Chief of Naval Operations). This was a direct result of the Iranian hostage crisis in which the United States realized its strategic reach was severely limited (IP Collection 503509 1-3, 6-9). The near term repositioning of ships was a temporary solution until the first roll on and off break bulk ships were built or converted and loaded with

prepositioned equipment in 1985 (Global Security). Owned by U.S. financial institutions and civilian shareholders, the MPF ships are chartered by the institutions to an operating company, which operates them under a twenty-five year time charter.

Less than six years after the MPF squadrons were established, Desert Shield/Desert Storm validated the prepositioning concept on 16 August, 1991, six days after receiving the order to deploy, when the first MPF squadron arrived at the port of Al Jubayl from Diego Garcia. The 7th MEB was established in a defensive position north of Al Jubayl and had the first credible force in the area by the 25th of August (Gordon and Trainor 65). This would not have been possible without the MPF program because of the number of strategic airlift sorties that otherwise would have been required to get the MEB into the theater. It took 259 sorties (the MPF planning figure was 250) to link the MEB up with the supplies and equipment to conduct the fight. Without the MPF in place, it would have taken over 3,000 airlift sorties to link up people and equipment (Global Security).

Current Capabilities

Desert Shield/Storm validated the concept of MPF; however, the current capabilities are not able to support the total vision of EMW. EMW places the emphasis on rapid deployment with the ability to sustain the forces from the sea. This will

require a sea-based logistics capability and ships specifically designed to meet the needs of the expeditionary force. The MPF mission is to support rapid deployment of Marine forces by providing mobile, long-term storage of equipment and supplies near areas of trouble, and the key to the program is sustainment of these forces.

Currently, there are three MPS squadrons that support this mission, each squadron is assigned to a MEF to support the regional combatant commander. Each interoperable squadron is designed to support one MEB (17,000 personnel) for thirty days (Sea Power 145-146). The problem with the current capability is that a permissive area is required to conduct the offloading and marrying of supplies and troops. The MPF ships need a secure port facility to offload these supplies, and the troops need a secure airfield to fly into. The ability to project power from the sea and sustain the forces through seabasing is non-existent given the current MPF shipping capabilities.

MPF Enhancement Program

After Desert Storm, the Marine Corps realized improvements needed to be made to the MPF program. To improve capabilities, a three-phase program was developed to add one MPF ship, with improved capabilities, for each squadron. The USNS 1stLt Harry Martin loaded at Blunt Island Florida and deployed to squadron 1 in June of FY 00 (Sea Power 145-146). Enhanced ships like the

Martin are converted vessels owned by the Navy, which are intended to satisfy the additional cargo capacity requirements. Each of the enhanced ships has a Naval fleet hospital, a Naval Mobile Construction Battalion, and expeditionary airfield capabilities (Sea Power 145-146). In addition, the new ships have roll on/roll off and lift on/lift off operations in-stride and in-stream capability. They can off load cargo either pier side or at anchor in a sea state of up to three (Vergon 38-39). All of these enhancements were made from lessons learned after Desert Storm; however, none of these enhancements satisfy the current EMW requirements. The MPF squadrons must still operate in a permissive environment and still are not able to support sea-based operations, sustained logistics, or littoral maneuver.

Future MPF Requirements

The Marine Corps vision of MPF, as outlined in MPF 2010 and beyond, lays out five pillars and three capabilities that are necessary to support several EMW concepts. The pillars of force closure (arrival and assembly at sea), indefinite sustainment (sea based logistics), and the capability of sustained seabasing are going to require ships that are not currently in the inventory or part of the MPF enhancement program. Two ship agencies, NAVSEA/AME and BLA, were tasked with coming up with solutions to meet the MPF future requirement (Global Security). Several options were briefed to the Chief of Naval Operations.

These options vary from replacing current leased MPF ships with modified LMSR ships to creating an entire mobile operating base. Analysis of each option and a realistic expectation of funding point to option D as the best course of action.

The ships in option D will be able to employ all the elements of the MAGTF, including the fixed wing JST STOVL assets. These ships will be designed to have surface interface ports for LCAC's, small operational craft, and all types of resupply ships. The internal setup of the ship will improve accountability and organization of supplies, and will allow for a selective offload of equipment (FAS Military Analysis). Option D is the only option that will truly support the vision of EMW. This option will allow for the at sea arrival and assembly of units and provide seabased sustainment of the landing force. Moreover, host nation support will not be a requirement because of the capabilities the new MPF squadron will possess.

MPF as transformation

The budget for FY 03 continues to fund testing for these MPF future capabilities; however, nothing has been allocated past this year. The lease on the current MPF fleet expires in 2009 and 2011. If something is going to be done to improve the MPF capabilities, it must be done soon. The atmosphere is ripe for action to be taken. The House Appropriations Committee recently endorsed developing a prototype ship for the MPF

future. In his 2003 Defense budget request, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld included in his power projection budget "\$5 million for research in support of [the] Future Maritime Prepositioning Force of new, innovative ships that can receive flown-in personnel and off-load equipment at sea, and support rapid reinforcement of conventional combat operations." The Navy is on board with the developments as part of its transformation. Vice Admiral Dennis McGinn stated before the Subcommittee of Research and Development of the House Armed Services Committee on Navy Transformation "It (MPF) will be more expeditionary and contribute significantly towards integration of the seabase in order to project naval combat power from the sea in support of joint operations."

While the debate continues over what the future ships should look like, time is running out. The Marine Corps is going to lose the required capability offered by the MPF future ships if it is forced to settle on current naval ships that are converted to support the current MPF mission. Converted ships were not developed with the EMW concepts in mind and this would be a waste of money and a serious blow to operational capability. Without the MPF future, the Marine Corps is trapped in the limited reality of today.

Conclusion

As the Marine Corps continues to strive to make the EMW concept a reality, it must ensure that the MPF is drastically improved. The current limitations of port requirements, in stream discharge, and airlift requirements will continue to limit the EMW vision. The MPF of the future must be more responsive, flexible, and broader in its mission. If the EMW concepts of OMFTS, STOM, and seabased logistics are the future, the foundation must be laid now.

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